

# Addressing Homophobic Bullying in Second-Level Schools

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Dr. James O'Higgins-Norman  
with Dr. Michael Goldrick and Kathy Harrison

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# Foreword

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The Equal Status Acts (2000-2008) prohibit discrimination and harassment in the provision of goods services and facilities, including provision by educational establishments, on nine grounds: gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race and membership of the Traveller community. Over the last decade the Equality Authority has worked with partners in education to support them in promoting equality in schools. In our work we have focused in particular on initiatives to address equality in a systematic way within school development planning, whole school evaluation and school codes of behaviour.

In a number of Department of Education and Science circulars from the early 1990s, schools had been requested to draw up a Code of Behaviour and Discipline and this became a legal requirement with the introduction of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000. Such codes must be prepared in accordance with Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools which were issued by the National Education Welfare Board in 2008. According to these Guidelines, promoting equality for all members of the school community is a basic principle that underpins an effective code of behaviour and such Codes of Behaviour should prevent discrimination and allow for appropriate accommodation of difference in accordance with Equal Status legislation. These are positive developments for all young people in our schools as well as for all those working in schools.

While any child or young person can be subject to bullying and harassment, many of the groups covered by the equality legislation are at particular risk and it is important that these specific risks are acknowledged and addressed. International and Irish research has confirmed that LGBT youth are at particular risk of bullying and harassment in school. Importantly, such research has also shown that - compared to

other forms of bullying - homophobic bullying is less likely to be specifically addressed by schools and that teachers and schools often feel particularly ill-equipped to deal with homophobic bullying.

Recognising these difficulties, this research report was commissioned by the Equality Authority to promote evidence-based learning among educational practitioners - in particular those in leadership positions in schools - on school-level strategies and actions to address homophobic bullying. It draws on international experience to examine the kinds of initiatives and actions that schools can implement to effectively address homophobic bullying. It also explores how Irish schools are addressing homophobia and homophobic bullying, through six case studies. Finally, it identifies a series of actions schools might take to embed anti homophobic bullying initiatives in a planned and systematic whole-school approach.

We hope that this Report will help educators to identify and manage the risk of homophobic bullying and we are grateful to the authors - James O'Higgins-Norman, Michael Goldrick and Kathy Harrison of Dublin City University - for their expert and insightful work.

**Renee Dempsey**

Chief Executive Officer  
The Equality Authority

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# Introduction and context

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### 1.1 Introduction

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Irish legislation and educational policy guidance requires schools to promote equality of access to and participation in education. In this context schools are required to address discrimination, harassment and bullying, including homophobic harassment and bullying. However these are relatively recent developments, and much work remains to be done to put in place practical and meaningful responses at school level. The aim of this report and the research contained within it is to assist schools in developing a positive and practical response to homophobic bullying.

This first chapter sets the context for the rest of the report. In it we briefly discuss the phenomenon of homophobic bullying in schools and its effects on young lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people. We also outline the legislative and policy provisions of most relevance to homophobic bullying in schools.

In Chapter 2 we summarise the findings of our review of relevant international literature. The specific focus of this literature review was initiatives and actions that schools can implement to effectively address homophobic bullying. A number of important themes and initiatives were identified and these are reported here.

Relatively little is known about whether and how Irish schools are addressing homophobia and homophobic bullying. Thus the primary aim of this study was to document initiatives being taken to address homophobic bullying in Irish second level schools. Following an extensive search to identify relevant initiatives, six schools were identified as having an initiative in place that was sufficiently developed to justify being included as a case study in this report. These Irish case studies are presented in Chapter 3.

The need to embed specific anti bullying initiatives in a planned and systematic whole-school approach is a recurring theme throughout the review of literature and the Irish case studies. Chapter 4 concludes this report by outlining seven essential elements that can be used as a check list by school leaders who are trying to develop a whole school approach to the problem of homophobic bullying.

## 1.2 Homophobic Bullying in Schools

Internationally bullying in schools has received attention in research since the 1970s when Olweus began to study the issue in Norway (1978). Since the late 1980s there has been an increased awareness in Ireland of the negative effects of bullying in schools and consequently there has been an increase in the amount of research in this area. Initially Irish research was carried out in schools in the Dublin area (O'Moore & Hillery, 1989; Byrne, 1994) and this was followed by a national study (O'Moore, Kirkham and Smith, 1997). These studies, particularly the second one by O'Moore et al. provided a general description of the problem of bullying in Irish schools.

The picture regarding second-level schools, which are the concern of this report, showed that a significant proportion of pupils (11%) had been the victims of bullying. O'Moore et al. found that "many victims commented that the rumours that were spread (about them) carried sexual innuendos" (1997: 151). Perhaps most worrying was the fact that O'Moore found that 84% of pupils who were bullied reported that they had not told their teachers of their victimisation (1997:154).

Bullying is defined by the Department of Education & Science as:

*"...repeated aggression, verbal, psychological or physical, conducted by an individual or a group against others."*  
(DES, 1993).

Where this type of behaviour arises out of the fact that the victim is identified or identifies themselves as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBT), or if the language used in the bullying is such that it would be offensive to LGBT people, then this behaviour can be

described as homophobic bullying.

None of the international or Irish studies mentioned above specifically dealt with sexual orientation as a dimension of bullying, but there is some international research that has shown that those who are identified as LGBT are more prone to being bullied in schools (Kournay, 1987; Gibson, 1989; Telljohann and Price, 1993; Governors Commission, 1993; Hershberg, Pilkington, and D'Augelli, 1997; Warwick, 2001). It is also true to say that international research on bullying has not given enough attention to gender and sexuality differentials in school bullying (Duncan, 1999; Leonard, 2002). The first research in Ireland on homophobic bullying was not published until 2004 and its findings revealed that bullying related to students' perceptions of sexuality and the use of derogatory language and slurs of a homophobic nature is endemic in Irish second-level schools (Norman, 2004).

In a recent report by Minton et al (2006) an attempt was made to recognise that homophobic bullying is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Drawing on the work of Duncan (1999), Thurlow (2001) and Norman (2006) Minton divided homophobic bullying into two sub-types of behaviour. Firstly, there is a type of bullying that underpins the ethos of the school where it is presumed that everyone identifies as heterosexual. With this type of behaviour LGBT students are not necessarily the targets of the bullying but because of the words used around them it has a negative effect on them. The second type of homophobic bullying outlined by Minton (2006) has to do with the actual direct persecution of persons who identify as or who are thought to be LGBT.

### 1.3 Effects of Homophobic Bullying

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Research has shown that for many, bullying at school can result in long term social, emotional and psychological effects (DES, 1993; Warwick et al, 2001; Johnston, 2005). Those who are bullied at school can become fearful of their peer group and isolate themselves from them. The young person who is repeatedly bullied at school can experience anxiety, loss of confidence, loneliness and depression. This can result in punctuality problems, deteriorating academic attainment, poor attendance, truancy, school drop out, mental health problems and even ideas of suicide (Parker & Asher, 1987; Sharp, 1995; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1998; Hunt and Jensen, 2006; Mayock et al, 2009).

In his survey of 15-31 year olds in Ireland Minton found that many had suffered bullying as a result of their sexuality with over a fifth of the respondents reporting that they did not feel safe on their way to and from school (2006:14). Studies in the USA have found that 45% of those who as adults identify themselves as gay men and 20% of those who identify themselves as lesbians, experienced verbal or physical abuse in school due to other students' perceptions of their sexual identity. Furthermore, 28% of those so harassed eventually drop out of the educational system (Telljohann and Price, 1993). In a Massachusetts study, 97% of those who were current high school pupils said that they heard homophobic remarks from other students at school, and 53% reported hearing these remarks from school staff (Governors Commission, 1993). A separate study conducted on a representative sample of 4159 9th-12th grade pupils in public high schools from Massachusetts found that those who identify themselves as lesbian and gay youth were more than four times as likely to have been threatened with a weapon at school and four times more likely than their non-gay peers to have missed

school because of safety concerns (Garofalo, Wolf et al., 1998). These studies concur with the findings of a recent study on the mental health of young same-sex attracted men in Northern Ireland. It found that homophobia in schools resulted in self-harm, suicide attempts, and internalised homophobia among gay men (McNamee, 2006, p. 55). Another recent study in Scotland found that 26% of LGBT students felt that their schoolwork had suffered as a result of homophobic bullying while 12% had truanted because of homophobic bullying (O'Loan et al., 2006).

Although, LGBT youths have the same risks factors in terms of suicide as their heterosexual peers, such as substance abuse, depression, loss and family problems, those who identify as LGBT also have the additional stressors associated with acknowledging their sexual orientation and possible negative reactions from parents, peers and wider society. It is argued that the higher rate of suicide among young people who identify as (or feel they may be) LGBT is not so much a result of their sexuality but more as a result of the isolation they experience from society (Kulkin et al., 2000). It is not surprising then that studies show that homosexual adolescents are at a higher risk of attempting suicide (Rotheram-Borus, Hunter, and Rosaria, 1994; Minton, 2006, Mayock et al, 2008). Most worrying is research that shows that adolescents who identify as LGBT are also more likely to die by suicide than their peers who identify themselves as heterosexual (Kournay, 1987; Gibson, 1989; Hershberg, Pilkington, and D'Augelli, 1997).

## 1.4 Legal & Policy Issues on Homophobic Bullying

Following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 10 December 1948, The European Convention of Human Rights came into existence as the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in 1950 and was formally adopted into Irish Law in 2003. Irish Courts are now obliged to interpret Irish Law in a manner that is compatible with the provisions of the convention. Article 2 of the European Convention guarantees the right of every person to an education while Article 14 prohibits discrimination on a number of grounds including sexual orientation.

**The Education Act (1998)** obliges schools to “promote equality of access to and participation in education and to promote the means whereby pupils may benefit from education” (section 6). Later in the same Act, school boards are required to make arrangements for the preparation of a school plan:

*The school plan shall state the objectives of the school relating to equality of access to and participation in the school and the measures which the school proposes to take to achieve those objectives including equality of access to and participation in the school by pupils with disabilities or who have other special needs.” (1998:21.1).*

This section of the Education Act (1998) clearly places equality of access and participation at the centre of schooling. In other words, This legislation requires schools to ensure at the level of policy and practice that every student can come to school and enjoy its benefits equally.

**The Equal Status Acts (2000 - 2008)** prohibit discrimination and harassment and promote equality on nine grounds: gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race (includes race, colour, nationality and ethnic or national origins) and membership of the Traveller community.

Under the legislation the sexual orientation ground refers to being heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. Also the European Court of Justice has held that discrimination against a transsexual person constitutes discrimination on the ground of sex.

A school must not discriminate in

- the admission of a student, including the terms or conditions of admission of a student,
- the access of a student to a course, facility or benefit,
- any other term or condition of participation in the school, and
- the expulsion of a student or the application of any other sanction against a student.

The Equal Status Acts address a number of different types of discrimination.

- Direct discrimination occurs if a person is treated less favourably than another person in a comparable situation on the basis of any of the nine grounds. It covers differences in how the person is treated, has been treated, or would be treated.
- Indirect discrimination occurs when an apparently neutral provision puts a person under one of the nine grounds at a particular disadvantage, unless the provision is objectively justified by a legitimate aim and the means of achieving that legitimate aim are appropriate and necessary.
- Discrimination by association occurs when a person is treated less favourably because they are associated with somebody who come under any of the nine grounds.

In relation to the disability ground, discrimination also occurs if a service provider fails to provide special treatment or facilities or to make adjustments to enable a person with a disability to participate in the school (or aspects of school), if it would be unduly difficult or impossible to participate without that special treatment or without those facilities or adjustments. However, there is no obligation to provide special treatment, facilities or adjustments if they give rise to anything more than a 'nominal cost'.<sup>1</sup>

Discrimination can also consist of treating somebody less favourably

- because they made a complaint to the Equality Tribunal, or
- because they are a witness to any proceedings under the Equal Status Acts, or
- because they oppose by lawful means anything that is unlawful under the Equal Status Acts, or
- because they give notice that they intend to do any of these.

This form of discrimination is called victimisation and is also prohibited by the equality legislation.

Section 11 of the Equal Status Acts (2000-2008) covers harassment and sexual harassment clearly outlining what they are, as follows:

- “(a) In this section –
- (i) references to sexual harassment are to any form of unwanted conduct related to any discriminatory grounds, and
  - (ii) references to sexual harassment are to any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, being conduct which in either case has the purpose or effect of violating a person’s dignity and creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive

environment for the person.

- (b) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (a), such unwanted conduct may consist of acts, request, spoken words, gestures or the production, display or circulation of written words, pictures or other material.”

It should be noted that the legal definitions of harassment and sexual harassment are not the same as the definition of bullying contained in Department of Education and Science circulars. The key differences are firstly, bullying entails ongoing and systematic behaviour, whereas a single incident of harassment can be a breach of the Equal Status Acts. Secondly, bullying can apply to reasons that are not linked to the discriminatory grounds whereas harassment prohibited by the Equal Status Acts must be related to one or more of the discriminatory grounds.

Principals, teachers and others in positions of authority in a school may not harass or sexually harass students at the school or anybody who has applied for admission. A person who is responsible for the operation of a school may not permit anybody who has the right to be present at the school to be harassed or sexually harassed. However, they have a defence if they can prove that they took reasonably practicable steps to prevent the sexual harassment or harassment.

**The Education (Welfare) Act (2000)** requires schools to prepare a Code of Behaviour that specifies the standards of behaviour to be observed by students. The school code of behaviour must be in conformity with *Developing a Code of Behaviour: Guidelines for Schools* issued by the National Educational Welfare Board

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<sup>1</sup> For details of exemptions and nominal cost see DES and Equality Authority (2005) *Schools and the Equal Status Acts*.

(NEWB) in 2008. According to these Guidelines, one of the basic principles that underpins an effective code of behaviour is 'Promoting Equality':

*'The code promotes equality for all members of the school community. The code prevents discrimination and allows for appropriate accommodation of difference, in accordance with Equal Status legislation' (NEWB 2008, p.23)*

The Guidelines also advocate a whole school approach to the code of behaviour (Chapter 5):

*Students' behaviour is influenced by school climate, values, policies, practices and relationships. The school code of behaviour, on its own, cannot create the environment that makes it possible for students to learn and behave well. (NEWB, 2008:32)*

In its Guidelines the NEWB suggests that such a "whole-school" approach would be characterised by the following elements:

- an ethos, policies and practices that are in harmony,
- a teamwork approach to behaviour,
- a whole-school approach to curriculum and classroom management,
- an inclusive and involved school community,
- a systematic process for planning and reviewing behaviour policy.

The thrust of the NEWB's Guidelines reflects the previously published *Guidelines on Countering Bullying Behaviour in Schools* (1993) from the Department of Education & Science (DES).

In these Guidelines the DES also highlighted the importance of drawing up a school policy on behaviour that arises from a whole-school approach to bullying:

*The aims of the 'Guidelines on Bullying' ... are twofold, firstly to assist schools in devising school-based measures to prevent and deal with bullying behaviour and, secondly, to increase the awareness of bullying behaviour in the school community as a whole e.g., school management, teaching and non-teaching staff, pupils and parents/guardians as well as those from the local community who interface with the school. It is of particular importance that the issue of bullying behaviour be placed in a general community context...*

*(DES, 1993:1)*

In an addendum to its 1993 Guidelines the DES provided a policy template for schools which directed them to refer to homophobic bullying in their policies on behaviour and bullying (DES, 2006). Research had found that 90% of schools did not include any reference to LGBT bullying in anti-bullying policies (Norman, 2006: 63). The situation is not unique to Ireland as previous research in English and Welsh schools found that 94% of schools did not include reference to lesbian and gay bullying in their anti-bullying policies (Douglas, 1999). More generally research has shown that there is a significant degree of silence and invisibility in relation to LGBT issues in education and the impact of this silence on those who identify as LGBT and/or experience homophobic bullying can be detrimental to the quality of their participation in education (Epstein and Johnson, 1998:132; ICTU, 2003:3; Lodge and Lynch, 2004: 38-39; Norman, 2006:115). All of this makes it necessary to be explicit about homophobic bullying in school policies and procedures.

The Guidelines from the DES highlight the role of the teacher as central to a whole-school approach to bullying behaviour. Teachers are asked to ensure that they do not unwittingly contribute to an environment in which bullying occurs (DES: 1993:3). This point is

particularly important when it is considered that research has shown that 41% of teachers find homophobic bullying more difficult to deal with than other forms of bullying while many other teachers accept homophobic bullying as a normal part of the interaction between students, especially boys (Norman, 2006: 73, 107). More recently, the Teaching Council has published *Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers* which recognise that students come from different backgrounds and identities including sexual orientation. According to these Codes teachers are obliged to “take care of students under their supervision with the aim of ensuring their safety and welfare” (2007:22.1). Furthermore, each teacher is required to interact with students and others in the school “in a way that does not discriminate and that promotes equality” (2007:22:4). These Codes oblige teachers to take action against all forms of discrimination including homophobic bullying.

# Learning from International Experience

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## 2.1 Introduction

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As mentioned previously, formal recognition of homophobic bullying as a problem in Irish schools is something that has only been explored relatively recently (Norman, 2004; Norman, 2006; Minton, 2006; McNamee, 2006). Consequently the development of responses aimed at addressing homophobic bullying in schools in Ireland can be said to be only evolving.

Given this, it is useful to be aware of - and to learn from - relevant approaches developed in other countries. This chapter highlights some important initiatives which emerged from a review of international literature. The specific focus of this literature review was research that reported on school based initiatives aimed at tackling homophobic bullying among students. A number of themes emerged in the review and these are reported here.

## 2.2 Interactive Teaching and Learning

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Research in Australia and the UK has shown that some schools have successfully utilised the interactive teaching and learning strategies gained from Social, Personal and Health Education programmes to address homophobia across the wider curriculum within a whole-school approach (Van de Ven, 1995: 158; Douglas et al., 1997).

In 1995 a study was conducted among 130 students in six comprehensive, public high schools in the Sydney metropolitan area in Australia. While this study is somewhat dated now, it provides us with an interesting model for the development of possible curricular interventions within a whole-school framework in Irish second-level schools. This study highlighted how the use of a specific teaching module for reducing homophobia could result in improved attitudes and behaviour among students. Pre-test, post-test and three month follow up measurement consisted of identical questionnaires. These questionnaires contained an assessment of a) cognitive attitudes towards homosexuals b) affective responses to homosexuals c) behavioural intentions towards homosexuals with a final section of the questionnaire that required students to write a short story describing a conversation about homosexuality (Van de Ven, 1995: 158).

Using resources from an existing anti-violence education programme, instruction was delivered in six sessions and included lessons on identifying myths and stereotypes surrounding homosexuality, discrimination and the link between prejudice and violence against homosexuals, consideration of acceptable ways of relating to gay and lesbian people, introduction to legal consequences of discrimination and planning actions to minimise discrimination in school. Students participated in a panel

discussion with gay and lesbian people who were chosen because they represented a broad range of people and as such did not easily conform to stereotypes (Van de Ven, 1995: 160). All of the teachers who were to deliver the programme attended a one day training session on the use of participatory teaching methods for use in the teaching module. Follow up questionnaires were distributed to students three months after the module had been delivered.

The data collection before and after the delivery of the module showed that for all participants the intervention resulted in significantly less homophobic anger and behaviour intentions and the decline in homophobia was maintained for at least three months after the delivery of the module (Van de Ven, 1995: 167). However, there was a difference between boys and girls in that boys were found to relapse to previous behaviours and attitudes within a few months. This suggests that the delivery of a once off module is not a sufficient instrument in itself to reduce students' homophobia and that follow up activities and lessons are required to sustain what has been achieved through the initial delivery of the module. Interestingly one of the recommendations arising from this study was that formal and informal contact with lesbian and gay people be increased so as to undermine the strength of any existing negative attitudes (Van de Ven, 1995: 169).

Another interesting project is the *Tackling Homophobic Bullying* programme which was piloted in the town of Bolton during 2000. Due to its success it was later expanded to cover the whole of the Greater Manchester region, including primary schools. The project linked in with the National Healthy Schools Programme and was delivered by the multi-agency Bolton Homophobic Bullying Forum which had previously been established in 1998 and included

representatives from Health, the Local Education Authority, Bolton Victim Support, and Greater Manchester Police. The project which made the most of interactive teaching strategies was planned from the outset to include an audit, awareness raising training, distribution of resources, and regular reviews and evaluation of the project itself (Mulholland, 2003).

An initial audit checklist was used in each school to identify areas which needed to be addressed. The audit checklist included ten key areas

- 1) inclusion of reference to homophobic bullying in anti-bullying policy,
- 2) inclusion of reference to gay, lesbian and bisexual people in equality policy,
- 3) a policy for visiting speakers and working with outside agencies,
- 4) support from the senior management team within the school for work on homophobic bullying,
- 5) a PSHE co-ordinator,
- 6) is the school part of the Healthy School scheme,
- 7) is the culture of the school welcoming to gay, lesbian and bisexual people,
- 8) are gay, lesbian and bisexual issues included across the curriculum,
- 9) is sexual orientation covered in the sex education programme, and
- 10) is there training for staff to enable them to have the skills, confidence and awareness to recognise and tackle homophobic bullying?

In terms of raising awareness amongst staff, training was provided on the damaging effects of homophobic bullying. All members of staff within each school were asked to complete a questionnaire to assess the extent of homophobic bullying by pupils and staff and to find out their views on tackling the issue in the school. Teachers were also asked to keep a record of all homophobic language and

other forms of abuse. The training explored practical ways of challenging this behaviour whilst teachers' concerns and fears were also acknowledged. During these sessions it became apparent that teachers often leave homophobic comments unchallenged and, as has been found in Ireland, reasons for this included fear over discussions about the rights and wrongs of being gay and uncertainty about their legal position (Norman, 2006; Mulholland, 2003).

The way the team made comparisons with the impact of racist or anti-disabled language - which was something teachers had no problem recognising as inappropriate - was of particular use in helping teachers realise the damaging effects of homophobic language and comments.

As part of the programme the Forum asked a local professional theatre company to write and deliver a theatrical production on homophobic bullying to schools as part of PHSE sessions. This required external funding which came from a local Trust. The young people who watched the play took part in a number of related activities which had been developed to help them reflect on and explore the issues raised in the play. Following this the students were facilitated in developing a ten point charter which their schools had agreed to adopt as part of the wider anti-bullying policy. This aspect of the Manchester project was found to be very successful in that it allowed students to develop empathy with the main character who was being bullied in the play. Other research in Edinburgh found that where theatre was used as a means of tackling homophobic bullying 71% of those who participated said that they had learned something new from the experience (LGBT Youth Scotland, 2003). These experiences in Manchester and Edinburgh suggest that drama can provide a creative solution to sensitive issues and can play an important role in tackling discrimination and bullying behaviour.

From the experience of delivering the *Tackling Homophobic Bullying* programme in the Greater Manchester, area the co-ordinators have highlighted the importance of linking in with the wider National Healthy Schools Programme while at the same time allowing schools to take some ownership and make suggestions about how to adapt the programme locally. Key to the success of this programme was the amount of time spent working with teachers in raising their awareness and planning a local whole-school response to homophobic bullying.

At least as important as the type of initiatives outlined above, is the embedding of LGBT issues within the ordinary classroom experience of teaching and learning. Blumenfeld has argued that "*issues relating to LGBT people should be formally and permanently integrated into existing courses across the curriculum*" (1993) and in doing so the silence around these issues, which projects the message that something is wrong with being LGBT, can be broken. For Capel-Swartz, classes on children's and young adults literature provide a natural space for allowing a reflective discussion which can promote values that challenge racism, sexism and homophobia and ultimately lead to a change in attitudes and practices in schools (2002, p.12). Again, Capel-Swartz points out that if discussion and reflection about LGBT issues are not facilitated within mainstream classrooms then young people are left to form their own stereotypes and language ultimately characterised by negative words such as "*queer*", "*fag*" and "*Lezzie*".

Interestingly, Capel-Swartz argues that LGBT issues can be brought into the classroom in the same way as any other multi cultural issues "through literature, discussion, and writing" (p. 12). Capel-Swartz recommends the use of films such as Chasnoff's *Its Elementary* as a starting point for learning how to include LGBT issues in the classroom. She explains

how brainstorming strategies can be used to promote a reflective discussion and how this discussion can be followed up by a free writing exercise to consolidate the learning. Discussion on homophobic name-calling can illuminate how these names are the mechanisms that support a sexist and patriarchal masculinity (King and Schneider, 1999, p. 128) that deprives homosexuals and heterosexuals alike of their right to live full lives and to achieve all that they are capable of. However, Capel-Swartz points out that it is important that teachers themselves are open and honest contributors to the discussions which they facilitate so as to model for their students the reality of dealing with one's own prejudice (p.15). Fundamentally, discussion as a strategy in the mainstream classroom can be used to help young people think critically, thus deconstructing the biases that they have acquired in the silences that dominate sexual orientation within schools and wider society.

### 2.3 External Speakers

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Schools who do try to allow for discussion on homophobia as part of their formal curriculum often rely on external speakers and this has been found to be very successful. In one study in the UK, young people reported that they had enjoyed the sessions with the external speaker and that they had found the sessions interesting and informative where homophobia was concerned. There was evidence to show that they had appreciated the opportunity to learn more about issues affecting those who identify as LGBT and some even reported that the experience had led them to consider their own attitudes and prejudices. Teachers in the study also reported a positive experience of involving an external professional to carry out sessions with the students on LGBT issues. In particular they reported that they felt the presence of the external professional provided a context out of

which to challenge discriminatory comments in their school. While teachers said that they were initially apprehensive about parental reaction to them allowing an external professional speak with their students about the topic of homophobia they felt that such action could be justified in terms of providing the students with a comprehensive Social, Personal and Health Education programme. Again, key to allaying the teachers' fears was the presence of a clear relationships and sex education policy in their school (Douglas et al, 2001:155).

The most important factor identified by the teachers in relation to the success of the sessions was the positive professional and personal qualities of the external professional who facilitated the discussions with the students. Teachers identified humour, openness and open mindedness, sensitivity and empathy as well as the use of a non didactic approach and the lack of teacher supervision which allowed students to contribute more openly in the discussion (Douglas et al. 2001:156). Overall the researchers found that the success of using an external professional to discuss sexual orientation with young people was linked to sufficient preparatory work in schools, an appropriately skilled and experienced external professional, and careful consideration of how best to build good relationships between schools and external professionals.

### 2.4 Anti-bias Programmes

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Research in Ireland reported that 41% of teachers found homophobic bullying more difficult to deal with than other forms of bullying. Some of the reasons given by teachers for the extra difficulty include fear of becoming a target themselves, fear of parental and colleagues' reaction and fear of reaction from school management (Norman, 2006:73). Other research

in Canada and the USA among PE teachers found that censoring by teachers of homophobic name-calling was found to be insufficient (Sykes, 2004). In her study Sykes found that teachers' willingness to address homophobic name-calling was strongly influenced by the extent to which they had previously been the subject of such bullying themselves. In other words, it is because of their empathy with the student being bullied that they were motivated to censor homophobic name-calling. This raises questions about teachers who do not censor homophobic name-calling; Sykes argues that this puts an unfair burden on teachers who have been hurt in this way to put themselves back in the firing line in order to protect others from the same experience. Sykes concludes that this calls for a degree of masochism on the part of teachers who have experienced bullying themselves (2004: 94).

One possible solution to the problem of individual teachers having to put themselves on the line in tackling homophobic name-calling is the use of anti-bias education programmes based on a contact theory approach (Wessler and De Abdrade, 2006). Contact theory maintains that a major means of reducing inter-group prejudice is through contact between the groups under optimal conditions. Gordon Allport (1954) formalized the theory, stating that four conditions were required in order for this approach to work: 1) equal status between the groups in the situation; 2) common goals; 3) no competition between the groups; and 4) authority sanction for the contact. Others have used Allport's work to address inter-group tension between different groups especially those of race although research has shown that this theory is particularly successful when used to address to facilitate greater understanding between heterosexuals and gay men or lesbians (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006).

Having explored the problem of degrading language and slurs used by students (and sometimes teachers) in US high-schools, the Centre for the Prevention of Hate Violence (CPHV) in Maine, developed a number of anti-bias programmes rooted in the contact theory approach for use in schools. These programmes rely on a multidimensional approach that attends to the concerns, interests, and needs of all members of a school community. One of the CPHV programmes that is of particular interest to our current focus is the Student Leader Project Workshop (Wessler and De Abdrade, 2006). This workshop-style programme is based on the premise that, at times, the use of degrading language and slurs by students may be a reflection of deeply held prejudice directed at particular groups while at other times this type of behaviour may not be motivated by closely held values but may simply be the results of long ingrained habits that have never been given any critical attention. Because of the variance in behaviour and the limited amount of time available (one day workshops), the CPHV programme seeks to bring about change by focusing on behaviours rather than their underlying causes, values or behaviours (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2000). The co-ordination of the programme is facilitated by a member of school staff but the actual delivery of the programme is led by two external trainers.

The workshop is based on the assumption that those who have participated will take what they have learned and will begin changing their own conduct either by interrupting the use of degrading language by others or by moderating their own use of this type of speech. During the workshop participants learn about and discuss the extent to which harassment occurs in their school as well as the negative impact of this harassment on students. They are also taught some low-key intervention strategies. Participants are drawn from across the student

population and from a variety of sociocultural groups at the school. The researchers have found that drawing on a broad selection of students helps to maximise the efficacy of the programme. Key to the selection process is that the participants are recognised as students who exercise some influence over their peers, either positive or negative, and as such they are leaders within the school community. Schools are specifically asked to include students who engage in significant harassment. All those chosen for participation in the programme are informed before hand by their school that they have been selected to participate in the programme because they have been identified as leaders within their school community and this is reinforced throughout the day long programme (Wessler and De Abdrade, 2006: 527). The programme is delivered at a location away from the school in a place that is free from any reminders of the students' status within their school, thus allowing them the opportunity to assume new social roles separate from those they usually inhabit at school.

Much of the work done on the Student Leader Workshop programme is carried out in mixed pairs and small groups which allow students to interact with a variety of participants and to share their knowledge and expertise. Through group work, scenarios and shared reflection participants begin to develop the knowledge, skills and understanding required to respond to harassment in their own school. From selection through to final pledge students' equal status as leaders is emphasised. This is supported by delivering the programme away from school where established hierarchies and roles exist. The fact that the programme is clearly sanctioned by school leadership is also crucial as is the continuous provision of opportunities to work collaboratively across common group boundaries towards a common goal.

While the success of anti-bias programmes based on contact theory is well established (Devine, and Vasquez 1998; Chirof and Seligman, 2001; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006) a number of limitations have been identified. Firstly, if the population of the sociocultural minority is very small relative to the majority population this presents challenges for the contact dynamic in that sometimes the entire population of the minority group may be represented in the workshop with only a sample of the majority population group resulting in added significance and responsibility to the minority students. Secondly, in relation to gender, it is important that those who lead contact group workshops pay attention to how boys and girls may differ in their responses to intergroup relations and prejudice reduction. Some research has shown that a particular dynamic can exist between girls in the harassment of, and derogatory language directed at, other girls in minority groups (Wessler and De Abdrade, 2006: 530). A third area of concern in developing anti-bias programmes based on contact theory arises when the group at whom the derogatory language is directed may not be readily visible or identifiable and whose identification might put them at risk. This is clearly a concern in addressing derogatory language and harassment directed at LGBT students and a theme that emerged as a concern among teachers in Ireland (Norman, 2006: 72). While it has been found that anti-bias educational programmes based on contact theory approaches can and do make a difference in addressing derogatory language and slurs in schools, these concerns will continue to present a challenge to teachers and schools who wish to support and protect the LGBT minority within their school community.

## 2.5 Extra-Curricular Support Groups

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In terms of individual strategies to address homophobia and support LGBT youth, the Massachusetts state sponsored Safe Schools Programme (SSP) was one of the first to be introduced in 1993. This programme provides consultation services and programme development resources to schools as they take steps to become safer places for LGBT students. Over the last 14 years the SSP has supported 140 high schools and 49 have set up Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) student sponsored school-based clubs. These GSA clubs are led by adult members of staff and are aimed at creating safe environments in schools for LGBT and heterosexual students to support each other and to learn about homophobia and other oppressions. With the assistance of the adult leaders students try to educate the wider school community about homophobia, gender identity, and sexual orientation issues, and to counter discrimination, harassment, and violence in schools.

Research from the USA on the impact of belonging to a GSA points towards a number of positive effects on young people. Research shows that membership of a GSA can empower young people and result in a more positive approach to school (Lee, 2002: 24). Furthermore, membership of a GSA seemed to give young people a sense of their rights and the motivation to challenge inequalities in their schools. Of particular importance the research showed that the experience of having a collective goal was found to be empowering by the young people who had previously felt they were unimportant and powerless within their school community. Of interest is that this study also highlighted the importance of having a legislative and policy mandate in which schools can address equality issues including those of an LGBT nature (Lee, 2002: 24).

Other research conducted at the University of Massachusetts into the effectiveness of this type of initiative identified the importance of a GSA being linked to a whole-school approach to addressing homophobic bullying as well as a number of key factors that contribute to the success of a GSA type initiative including:

- presence of legal mandates and policy from the State
  - active support of school principals and other trustworthy personnel
  - support of local community
- (Griffin and Ouellett, 2002:4-5).

The research in Massachusetts found that while the provision of legal mandates and State policy did provide external validation for a school to set about providing support for LGBT students, this in itself was not effective where it was not backed up by financial and technical resources.

In terms of community support, the research by the University of Massachusetts found that by linking with members of the local community GSA groups were able to draw on expertise in a number of areas. The research also found that there was resistance from some in the local community to the idea of setting up a support group for LGBT students but that this generally strengthened the resolve of school leaders to put the GSA in place. Confirming the importance of a whole-school approach to addressing homophobic bullying, the Massachusetts study participants identified the active support of the school principal as the most important factor in making the GSA initiative successful (Griffin and Ouellett, 2002: 4).

## 2.6 Whole School Approach

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A significant factor in a number of the initiatives reviewed above was that in order for the initiative to be successful it had to be part of a whole-school approach and contribute to the ongoing work of all teachers with young people across the entire curriculum (Douglas, 2001; Griffin and Ouellett, 2002; Lee, 2002; Warwick, 2004).

Although not specifically focused on homophobic bullying, one UK study reported that schools that were found to be most successful in addressing bullying had *“a strong ethos in the school which promotes tolerance and respect, including respect for difference and diversity”* (OFSTED, 2003:7). Another report from the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families pointed out that *“to create an inclusive environment in your school where all pupils feel safe and are able to fulfil their potential requires a whole-school approach. This should be integral to your school’s mission statement and overall vision”* (2007:7). Similarly in the USA, the creators of the Bully-proofing Your School Programme, Garrity et al., recommended what they described as *“a comprehensive systems approach which changes the attitude and environment of the school”* (1994:3). As mentioned previously, more than one Irish policy and guideline document have recommended that the development of codes of behaviour and related policies on bullying must take place within a whole-school approach (DES, 1993:9; NEWB, 2007:22; POBAL, 2006:6).

The research highlights the positive contribution that can be made by senior management teams in developing a whole-school approach to addressing homophobic bullying (Douglas, 2001; Griffin and Ouellett, 2002; Lee, 2002; Warwick, 2004). Furthermore, reference to homophobia in school anti-bullying, behaviour, equality and

other policies is essential in providing a local framework within which teachers can censor bullying activity and homophobic name-calling. Both the contribution of senior management and the presence of appropriate policy are related to the overall culture of a school which in order for homophobic bullying to be addressed must be open, rooted in a sense of justice and positive in terms of celebrating diversity.



# Initiatives In Irish Schools

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3

### 3.1 Introduction

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As we saw earlier, Irish schools are required to promote equality of access to and participation in education, and are required to address harassment and bullying, including homophobic harassment and bullying. However relatively little is known about whether and how Irish schools are addressing homophobia and homophobic bullying. Thus a primary aim of this study was to carry out case studies of initiatives being taken to address homophobic bullying in Irish second level schools.

Contact was made with relevant organisations and professionals<sup>2</sup> to locate schools that were involved in trying to specifically address homophobic bullying. In total 30 schools were considered and upon investigation six were identified as having an initiative in place that was sufficiently developed to justify being included in this report.

The research team spent a minimum of two full days in each school. The data for the case studies was gathered through a series of interviews, focus groups and observations, as well as reviewing documentary evidence related to the various initiatives where it was available. The interviews and focus groups in each school were conducted with senior cycle students who had been randomly chosen from the list of students who had participated in the school's initiative to address homophobic bullying. Further interviews were conducted with school principals and/or with the teachers who were responsible for leading the initiative in a given school.

The following questions directed our research in the case study schools.

1. What is the motivation of those who champion initiatives against homophobic bullying?
2. To what extent has the initiative been embedded into the school's policy and curriculum?
3. Has school management specifically encouraged the initiative?
4. Has there been any resistance to the initiative?
5. To what extent have the students' own attitudes and prejudices been changed by the initiative?
6. What aspects of the initiative have been found to be successful and what can be improved?

Please note that, for presentational reasons, interviewees are often referred to by personal names. However all these names are fictitious.

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<sup>2</sup> These organisations and professionals included: the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN), the Equality Authority, BeLonG To, the Department of Education & Science, the Cool Schools Anti-Bullying Project, members of the Institute of

Guidance Counsellors, the School Chaplains' Association, the SPHE National Support Office and local Co-ordinators, the Loreto Education Office, as well as an equality network e-mail group.

### 3.2 Case Study School A Relationships and Sexuality Education Module

This school is a Catholic Voluntary Secondary School in a small town. The school has an anti-bullying policy but it does not specifically refer to LGBT issues.

The research in this school took place over two full days during which we met with the principal, Chris, and the teacher who leads the school's initiative, Robert. We also held a focus group with seven students and interviewed four students individually all of whom were randomly chosen. The principal made copies of the school's policy on behaviour available to us and we also were able to review resources used in the initiative aimed at addressing homophobic bullying.

On why they decided to introduce a unit of work on homophobia, Chris, the principal, explained that homophobic type bullying is one of the most frequently occurring types of bullying in the school and he has found that it can be devastating for those involved. For Chris, schools are:

*“a microcosm of society and schools have all the problems society has and of course we have a problem with homophobic bullying.”*

So from his perspective it would be remiss if the school did not attempt to tackle homophobic bullying through educational programmes.

Robert explained that, for him as a teacher, sexual orientation is a core experience of being human and that it would be impossible to teach RSE without covering including classes on issues related to sexual orientation. He went on to explain that:

*“when you work on sexual orientation with*

*students, the issue of homophobic bullying is just there you can't avoid it because it is part of an instant response from some of the boys”.*

Robert gave the example of how in an RSE class on sexual health, he used a film on sexually transmitted infections in Ireland. The film covered both heterosexual and homosexual people. Students reacted negatively to the film when it became clear that some of the people in it were coming to terms with being gay or lesbian. Robert was careful to point out that this was not his experience with every student but with some individuals who are very loud and homophobic. However, if left, this vocal minority will dictate what is considered “normal”.

While all of the students who were interviewed in this school acknowledged that a certain amount of negative behaviour related to sexual orientation took place, they differed in their interpretations of what was considered to be bullying and what was not. For some students calling names that could be described as homophobic was considered to be “just messing” or in another case a student reported that:

*“most of the stuff that goes on is just like banter between students, it's not really bullying because most of the time it's just a bit of fun.”*

However, other students reported that bullying was a huge problem but they were also confident that their teachers would sort it out immediately if it was reported to them. One student reported that:

*“There definitely is a lot of students who call others names such as gay, even though the person wouldn't be gay, it's an insult. Students who stand out because they are*

*quiet or have curly hair get called these names."*

While the school does have an anti-bullying policy in place, this does not include any reference to homophobic bullying or LGBT issues, something that Chris, the principal, says will have to be addressed in the future. However, he is very clear that the schools current work on LGBT issues is mandated by the current, if somewhat general, anti-bullying policy. Robert is the Guidance Counsellor in this school and is the co-ordinator of the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme. It is within this programme that he delivers a unit on homophobia to 6th year students. Consent is obtained from parents/guardians to allow their son to participate in the SPHE/RSE programme.

The initiative in this school is a unit of work, normally lasting up to three class periods, and carried out with senior cycle students. It comprises an initial survey followed by teacher led discussion. The survey is used to launch the unit of work and is aimed at eliciting students' attitudes towards homosexuality and homophobia. The survey is adapted from the Resource Materials for RSE (Senior Cycle Lesson 16) and is comprised of 15 statements about LGBT issues such as *"Many people, especially teenagers, can feel attracted to people of both sexes"* and *"You can tell by looking at a person if s/he is gay"*. The teacher gives each student three answer cards each one stating *"Agree"*, *"Disagree"* or *"Don't know"*. Students are asked to hold up one of the three cards in response to each statement in the survey. This permits the teacher to draw out immediate responses from the students, allowing for subsequent teacher-guided discussion. Through experience of delivering this unit of work in the school, the use of answer cards was developed as a way of permitting the teacher to guide the discussion in a measured way, preventing more

boisterous students from shouting out answers that might be negative towards people who identify as LGBT and thus dictate the tone of the discussion. Robert, the teacher, commented that:

***"It is essential that the teacher does not allow themselves to be put in the invidious position of having to either defend homosexuality or remain silent during homophobic comments thus appearing to allow the homophobic argument to appear to win."***

Consequently, the lessons have to be planned in great detail including how to guide the students in expressing their opinions and values.

From the perspective of the teacher and the principal the programme is considered to be successful in a number of ways. Firstly, it raises awareness among the students. Robert explained:

***"I think one thing it does is, it takes the mystery out of the issue. If you turn a light on things they are less threatening. That's how I'd look at it and I think it's a question of not being afraid to talk openly about things and encourage the students to examine their own attitudes"***.

Furthermore, over the years Robert has found that as the unit of work is delivered to senior cycle students, there is an opportunity for these students to influence the wider school community including younger students with the more open attitudes acquired during the programme.

A number of students said that the programme allowed them to develop a new awareness:

***"I can see now that people can have different sexual preferences but they are the same as***

*anyone else. They are just normal people. I think it is good to talk about these things as it leads to openness and understanding"*

Secondly, the programme is considered by the teacher and the principal to be a success in that it provides a form of recognition for students who, though now in their senior cycle, might have experienced homophobic bullying as they progressed through the school. Robert commented:

*"It's like a recognition for the pain of students who would have got a lot of homophobic stuff thrown at them...an acknowledgement that the school recognises the fact that this happened and shouldn't happen."*

Students also reported that the programme had a positive effect in that it resulted in more awareness and a general feeling that the teachers were looking out for students who might be bullied. One student reported that:

*"I have two friends in this school who are gay and I know for a fact that they don't get bullied at all now, whereas before, they would have been afraid."*

All of the students, the teacher and the principal, reported that the key to the success of the programme was the quality of the discussions which took place in the class. They reported that these teacher-led discussions were always respectful and even though not everyone spoke, the classes provided an opportunity to listen and to consider one's own attitudes.

Some of the challenges associated with delivering this programme that were highlighted by the principal had to do with a lack of internal resources (i.e. time) and what he perceived to be a lack of support from outside agencies. Speaking on the school's programme Robert,

the teacher, expressed a need for resources and greater research into how to motivate other teachers to become involved and to take an interest in the LGBT issues. At the moment his school's work in this area arises entirely from his own personal commitment. He went on to talk about the type of training needed to engage in this type of work:

*"I think training is important definitely, also I think comfort with yourself, which I think should be part of training anyway. I know the SPHE training group are excellent and they do put an emphasis on people's comfort levels and try to help people to be able to talk openly about all the various sexualities."*

Robert also mentioned the need to include LGBT issues within the school's policy on bullying so as to ensure a firm foundation for his work in this area. Chris, the principal, emphasised the challenge of trying to develop a whole school approach:

*"I think it has to be like everything else in schools: it has to be holistic. You have to have it on paper. You have to have it as part of your procedures. You have to have it as part of how you address people in the school, but you also have to have it really embedded into your ethos. Living that out in reality has to be the most important part of what you do, because if you don't support and you don't send out the message that it is not acceptable and you don't deal with those who do it, well then there's no point with all the paper work, or all the training or any of the classroom interaction. Raising awareness is very important and raising awareness of the detrimental nature of this kind of bullying is ultimately the most important thing, but if it's not lived out by those who are in the school in a way that leads by example there is no point in it after that, you know."*

All of the students interviewed in this school said that the programme needed to be introduced in 1st year as opposed to senior cycle when in their opinion it was too late. As one student put it:

*“If it was introduced in 1st year it would change the way you are going to mature in a prejudiced or non-prejudiced way.”*

Some students criticised the programme for causing others to feel uncomfortable and therefore not having the courage to express their opinions:

*“When you’re learning in a full size class, you feel that’s a big class and sometimes it puts people off from saying what they really think, what they really want to say or what they really want to ask because they are afraid of what other people might think of their views on certain subjects . . . I think people can be very scared of talking in front of them.”*

The need to look at the way the class group was arranged came up among most of the students interviewed indicating that there was a fear of expressing views that did not conform to those held by the peer group.

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As pointed out in the previous chapter many of the participatory teaching methods that have been developed for use in SPHE/RSE can be of benefit when trying to address homophobic bullying with students. The above case study is an example of how one teacher is using teacher-led discussion as a strategy for mediating between the biases that dominate male peer groups and the more inclusive values that underpin the Relationships and Sexuality Education programme.

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### 3.3 Case Study School B Anti Bullying Week

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This Community School is a co-educational school with an enrolment of close to 1,000 students. The school does have a policy on behaviour but it does not include specific reference to LGBT issues. The initiative in this school centres around a week of classes delivered to every student in the school at the start of each term and dedicated to an anti-bullying theme.

The research in this school took place over two full days and a third half day as one of the teachers to be interviewed was not available during the first two days we were in the school. During our time in this school we met with Sheila, the teacher who was the school’s anti-bullying co-ordinator and two other teachers involved in the delivery of the programme. We also held a focus group with seven students randomly chosen and individual interviews with four of these as well as gathering relevant materials and policy documents.

On why there was a need for the programme in the school, Sheila explained that the principal was:

*“responding to legislation concerning bullying in the schools in general. And then it came from the committee really that homophobic bullying should be specifically and individually addressed as an issue – seemed to be part of the atmosphere in the school.”*

So alongside school management wishing to fulfil its legal obligations concerning bullying, there was an increased awareness among the teachers of students using degrading language that was homophobic in nature. Both teachers and students agreed that bullying in general

was not a problem in this school. However, teachers and students were aware of degrading homophobic language being used, particularly by older students, and this was a cause for concern. There was apprehension that the students might think it was acceptable to use this type of language and not fully understanding its significance and consequences. This was confirmed in interviews with students who again described the use of homophobic terms as “just messing”. Sheila explained that her involvement in the programme began as a result of hearing this homophobic language creeping into the students’, particularly the boys’, every day speech which was degenerating into insults between students, “oh, you’re gay” and so on. She was concerned that the use of this homophobic terminology was becoming so commonplace that it was even being used as a negative term to describe inanimate objects like a school bag or someone’s sports shoes. Sheila explained that this negative language trend spurred the motivation for the programme

Underpinning the initiative in this school is the anti-bullying policy which is incorporated into each student’s school journal, which has been agreed and viewed by all the school’s stakeholders, including parents. However, there is no specific mention of LGBT issues in the policy.

The anti-bullying programme in this school is undertaken and organised by a voluntary staff committee who meet during their own lunch breaks. From time to time, senior management do allow time for bullying issues to be followed up as well as sponsoring lunch for the committee. The committee is co-ordinated by a member of staff, Sheila, who has a post of responsibility as anti-bullying co-ordinator. Sheila designed the programme to address homophobic bullying, creating materials and lesson plans to be used by the teaching staff for

the programme. A couple of weeks prior to the delivery of the programme there is a meeting of the committee at which they consider the issues that need to be addressed and plan the mechanics of how and when the programme will be delivered.

This school’s approach to addressing homophobia centres on degrading language, which causes both intentional and unintentional hurt. The SPHE teacher explained that:

***“The main area we focused on has been language and how language affects people and the use of homophobic language can be very damaging to students.”***

The anti-homophobic bullying lessons are embedded in a wider week long anti-bullying programme and its message is reinforced through all SPHE classes. On one week of each term, in the first lesson every day, each teacher delivers a similar lesson plan, appropriate to junior or senior level, on a specific form of bullying. In recent times, arising out of an increased awareness of the problem, a lot of emphasis has been placed on homophobic bullying.

During the week of the programme gay and lesbian awareness posters were used to emphasise to students that this issue was not just confined to their school, but was of concern throughout society.

The Junior Cycle programme is delivered as a story, read to the class by the teacher, where the main character, John, is a school boy in junior cycle.

In the story John prefers chess to sports or computer games and is targeted for homophobic bullying. A teacher has heard this and corrected the perpetrator, but was told it was only slugging

and didn't mean anything.

The bullying increases, and grows from verbal abuse until John is hit by an older boy who was calling him gay. John doesn't want to go to school any more and tells his mother he is sick. He knows his mother will believe him because he is seldom sick.

The students are divided into groups of four or five and asked to discuss John's story for ten minutes, prompted by some questions: how they feel about John's treatment; do they think it happens often; why John didn't tell anyone; and what they think John should do next. The students report their answers to the class and the answers are recorded on the whiteboard.

The senior cycle programme takes the form of group work centred on the school anti-bullying policy which is contained in the students' school journals and includes the following description:

***Bullying is repeated aggression, verbal, psychological or physical conducted by an individual or group against others over a period of time.***

The students are asked to focus on verbal bullying and to draw up a list of bullying terms – homophobic terms should appear on the list, and are included by the teacher if not.

Later in the programme, the tutor divides the class into groups. Each student group is given a booklet of seven statements, for example:

***You might call someone a fag, but it would be only joking with each other.***

***Regardless of their sexuality boys are slagged for being gay as an insult. They use words like fag, queer . . . If younger boys hear the gay terms used they repeat them, often with no idea of what they mean***

The students are asked to revisit the definition of bullying in their journal, and to consider whether each statement is really about a form of bullying. When they have reached their decision, each group is then asked to stand up and post each statement under the heading TRUE or FALSE on the wall, discussing their reasons. After the discussions, students are presented with a new definition which incorporates homophobic bullying.

Based on the work of Olweus (1993) in Norway there is also a student questionnaire which is given to all junior and senior cycle students after the programme has been completed. This is a simple questionnaire with "Yes", "No" answers to questions which asks "Are you being bullied?"; "Have you ever been bullied?"; "Do you know anybody who has been bullied?" Students can return their responses to these questionnaires anonymously. Members of staff have been appointed to follow up on the questionnaires and are permitted time to deal with any incidents brought to their attention. Following these sessions, all teachers are asked by the organising committee to complete an evaluation to rate the lessons and the level of awareness across the school.

Teachers reported that exploring these issues allowed time to focus on the social development of the student in addition to academic advancement. Sheila describes SPHE as 'a great opportunity' to allow student and teacher to explore issues together, for example, health issues, bullying and the need to treat people in a respectful and decent way.

Sheila observed that students are more accepting of the difference among students and that they feel more that 'they can feel free to be who they are'. Students themselves confirmed this saying that as a result of the programme

they were more informed about LGBT issues. They said that it helped them to realise that:

***“there are gay and lesbian people out there and that each student is in a position to avoid making fun at their expense just because they are different”.***

The programme was experienced by both students and teachers as allowing a platform for open and honest discussion. Joanne, a teacher, could see students talking about issues like homophobia in a normal way and she believed this ‘made them more aware’.

Introducing the programme at junior cycle is seen as a benefit. Sheila thinks it is at a very important stage of development for teenagers, stating:

***“This is where their bodies are changing, their ideas are emerging, their sexuality is developing and . . . they need to know that they are safe. They need to know it’s okay to be different, it’s okay if I feel attracted to a member of the same sex, that’s not something I need to be ashamed of.”***

There is a feeling that beneficial changes are expected to be long-term: the growth of homophobic terminology as insult is seen to transfer from older to younger students, who may use the language without fully grasping the meaning. Students also made the point that reducing the use of homophobic insults by older students should lessen the uptake by the younger students, disrupting the negative cycle.

In terms of the challenges to the success of the programme it was felt by some teachers and students that the present process of delivering a class every morning for 40 minutes in a given week was too long to stay on one issue. By the third, fourth and fifth day some students were

losing interest and not paying attention. It might be better to spread the classes out over a longer period of time. On the other hand, Joanne was aware that the effects of the programme are short lived. She stressed that there is a need to keep coming back to the issue again and again – a theme common in education: the need to revisit, review and revise any topic.

It was suggested that a number of teachers felt uncomfortable delivering the homophobic bullying programme because they felt they were inexperienced and lacking in the expertise to teach the subject. Also, there was a feeling that teachers with a background in social subjects may be more at ease delivering a class on homophobia than a teacher of, for example, German or Maths.

Researching for her lessons, Sheila found it difficult to source resources of an Irish nature. She wanted information that was related to the Irish teenager, especially for the senior lesson plan. She stressed that more resources with an Irish context are needed. Some students commented that they did not think the issue had been taken seriously by some students due to a lack of personal experience of bullying. It was suggested that it would be good to have speakers who could talk about their own experiences.

Sarah, a student, pointed out another disadvantage. She felt that unwarranted attention could be drawn to a student who may be, or who may be perceived to be, lesbian, gay or bisexual in the class, saying:

***“Sometimes if something’s going on, like the teachers talking about someone who might be gay or something, and then people say ‘oh that’s like him’ or whatever, and they start pointing and laughing and all that. You know, the teacher mightn’t be aware of it; she’d be***

*turned around or whatever. I think sometimes it could be a disadvantage.”*

However, she was of the opinion that the programme should go on anyway because “*you can’t just not do it because of some immature people.*”

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An Anti Bullying week was designed to teach students that bullying, in any form, would not be tolerated. Students’ cavalier use of homophobic language was targeted specifically in order to inform students of the need to use their words responsibly. Students reported that they were more informed about LGBT issues. The staff had made this programme a well organised, concerted approach to homophobic bullying and bullying in general. However, despite the work that was being done, all members of staff felt there was a lot more that needs to be done particularly in access relevant resources and materials that would suit the Irish context of this programme. Staff also highlighted the need for adequate training to enable them to engage in work on homophobia with confidence. From the staff perspective the fact they worked as part of a team on this issue was a real strength of the initiative.

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### **3.4 Case Study School C** **Anti-Bias Workshops in Boys’ School**

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This school is a Vocational Education Committee (VEC) boys’ single-sex Community College in an urban centre. The school has developed close links with the community and many of its students are involved in community service outreach and local work placements. The school has an anti-bullying policy but it does not refer to LGBT issues. The initiative in this school takes the form of a workshop delivered by an external speaker. Consent is obtained from parents/ guardians to allow their son to participate in the SPHE/RSE programme.

The research in this school took place over two full days in the school during which we interviewed the principal and another three teachers who developed the initiative in this school. We also held a focus group with six students and individual interviews with four students all randomly chosen. We also gathered policy documents and materials related to the schools programme on homophobic bullying. As the programme in this school was delivered in conjunction with a local community partnership we spent an additional day interviewing three community workers who are involved in the delivery of the initiative in the school. The same programme is also provided to a local girls school and this is examined in the next case study.

On why a programme was considered to be needed in this school most of the teachers interviewed were unhappy initially to admit that any specific instances of homophobic bullying (i.e. against LGBT students) had occurred in their school. They explained that they were committed to being proactive about dealing with discriminatory issues generally as these occur in society and therefore needed to be discussed within the school curriculum. However, when asked to consider the types of words that

students used when teasing each other and name calling teachers did admit that names of a homophobic nature were used, but equally they minimised this behaviour.

*“Gay is quite often used as a kind of a slugging term, if you would call it that, but . . . nothing that is of real offence to a lot of our students... the term gay, the term homo, and so forth like that can be used as a derogatory term, I’ve never come across the situation where a gay student, [was] verbally abused about his gayness . . . because that would obviously fall in the bullying area then and we’d be very proactive about that. So, the term is used, but in a mocking way more so than a real hurtful, meaningful way if you want to call it that.”*

On the other hand one teacher, Maeve, in her interview said that she felt homophobia needs to be discussed because homophobic name-calling is very common in the school. She said that it can be disruptive in the class and gave the instance that in one class of fifteen, she recently counted eight students calling each other gay during one lesson. She has observed that students who were less academic tended to engage more in name-calling, which is the only form of homophobic bullying she has seen in the school. Maeve is of the view that homophobic behaviour stems largely from the home, and thinks that it is exacerbated by peer pressure. She held the view that whether it was joking or serious the issue needs addressing.

When students were interviewed about the types of bullying in the school their responses were mixed. One student, Mel, was of the opinion that there was no physical bullying in the school. There was *“just mocking and verbal abuse”*. Another student, Vincent, said that bullying is not a problem and he would not know about homophobic bullying because he

was not aware of any gay person in the school. However, he did provide a window into the operative ethos of the school when he later mentioned in the interview that *‘you wouldn’t have a great reputation in the school if you were gay . . . not in this school’*. In another interview, Diarmuid saw that bullying is a problem in the school, saying *“everyone gets bullied – there are all sorts of bullying”*. Another student was very forthcoming in his interview in which he said that *‘everybody gets bullied’*. He admitted that he was affected personally by homophobic bullying because *“everybody just calls me gay”*. He said he found it difficult in the school because

*“people keep on mocking me and I don’t want them mocking me.”*

The programme was initiated by a community worker and developed by a partnership comprising a number of local community organisations. It was implemented by this partnership in conjunction with the senior management and teachers in the two local second-level schools.

Preparation for the delivery of the programme in this school begins each year in September when the school principal and other members of staff begin a series of meetings with the community professional at which they discuss the format, presentation and content of the programme.

The anti homophobic-bullying element *“Challenging Homophobia”* of the programme is one of six workshops, delivered over six weeks, addressing all forms of discrimination. The double sessions of about 80 minutes are delivered to transition year students only. Reflecting a contact theory approach, the homophobic bullying workshop is delivered by an external speaker who identifies himself as gay. In his session the speaker focused on raising awareness, looking at myths, stereotypes

and sharing experiences of discrimination. The workshop was very much based on an interactive, open discussion. Issues were raised both by the speaker and the students and were explored in an up front manner. Students were actively encouraged to “throw” questions at the speaker and were given permission to ask him about any issue, anything at all, that came into their head. All questions were responded to and answered honestly from the speaker’s own personal experience. He also facilitated the young people in examining their own knowledge and societal perceptions and stereotypical attitudes towards gay and lesbian people.

In terms of how successful the programme has been in this school, teachers considered that, among other things, the success of the workshop could be attributed to the presentation and style of delivery, it being based on group work and the involvement of external personnel. One teacher noted that the delivery by non-teaching staff was of significant benefit for a number of reasons:

*“Firstly, being a new face the speaker from outside the school was able to hold the students’ attention also because he could talk from his own experience students respected what he had to say more. This particular man was very confident and able to handle any questions the student threw at him about his sexuality. He also helped them (the students) to reflect on their own experiences of discrimination.”*

Again, he considered the non-academic and experiential form of delivery helped make the workshop a success:

*“It was presented in a non-threatening way by the external speakers, there were no exams or notes to be taken, it was an immediate, interactive discussion.”*

Again, some teachers seemed unable to make a link to what changes, if any, the workshop might bring about within the school itself. Instead they tended to focus more on the importance of awareness-raising among the students as a life skill. The principal explained that:

*“as educators you have to heighten awareness and you do that, especially with boys, you open minds I think. All education is about enlightening, it’s about opening minds and it’s about clarification of values and a large degree of self reflection for kids as well and their own stereotypical attitudes and perceptions that need to be addressed and I think that was the whole function”*

This type of philanthropic approach was repeated more than once among staff in this school.

The students were happy with the programme. Vincent said that it was great for raising awareness. He said

*“it could have been done in a different way and we’d all be bored and we’d pay no attention . . . we did pay attention and we found it fairly interesting”*

and he went on to say that the programme had been delivered by

*“someone from a gay representation group . . . we didn’t even know he was gay until he told us, so it shows there’s no difference really. I was surprised actually. I was sitting up at the top of the class writing for him – he said he was gay and I turned round – I didn’t know at all; there was no way of knowing. I thought he was coming in to talk about gay people.”*

He talked about how they were asked to describe a gay person, their appearance, how they would dress, what they would enjoy and

the sort of work they would do, but as it turned out

***“gays are nothing like what we thought a gay would look like or do”.***

Diarmuid in his interview said he was able to question the speaker freely on anything and

***“he answered us truthfully. we were able to ask him when did he know he was gay, how did he know and stuff like that . . . [he told us] gay fellows don’t go with straight fellows – kinda made me feel alright – gave me a bit of confidence – gay people are just people as well, they just want friends.”***

Another student Mel said that it was very interesting because the people in the class who were homophobic were shown things from a different viewpoint. When the boys were asked if they thought the programme was a good way of covering homophobic bullying, Oliver replied *“Yea, I think it was because it made us more aware of homosexuals”*, and Diarmuid commented *“Yea, I thought it was, but it was only a short session”*. He went on to add:

***“ . . . if we got another session in and done the same and got to talk to lesbians as well, cause you know it’s just gays and I’d say we’d see both sides, be good. I have no problems with anyone who’s gay.”***

Teachers in this school were very forthright in their support for the programme but did accept that there were some challenges. One made the point that care was needed to avoid over focusing on homophobia to the exclusion of other forms of bullying. This in itself he thought might result in more discrimination in that it would present LGBT people as the only ones who were discriminated against in society. He explained that the school tried to present

a balanced programme on bullying which has many facets, one of which was homophobia. On the other hand, another teacher felt that if anything he would expand the programme. He said that he would repeat the workshop and reduce the group size from twenty to smaller groups of about eight or nine students. He thought the eighty minutes with a smaller group would allow sufficient time to hold the workshop and allow for greater student engagement, but it would be hard on time. The smaller group would help foster a friendlier environment, encouraging more students to become actively engaged. It would also help to engage all students rather than just the ‘dominant vocal’ students in the class.

The teacher felt that in future he would like to see the programme having more structure and linked to subjects within the curriculum. He focused on the value of including the workshop or extending it within the SPHE and RSE programmes in senior cycle. He emphasised that this would have to be done in consultation with parents and all the relevant community partners. He expressed his concern at what he termed the present *ad hoc* approach to the programme which is dependant on individuals, like himself, within schools having to champion it. He felt this situation needed to be remedied and that homophobic bullying needed to be addressed as part of what he described as a mainstream approach.

This point was also raised by one of the community workers interviewed. He felt very strongly that the programme should be formalised and linked with the wider curriculum and a whole-school approach. He brought in the point that some schools play safe and continue to offer the less risky, more conservative, more traditional programmes in transition year, such as computers and extra Applied Mathematics. He believed these were seen as ‘safe’, free

from controversy, and *“parents aren’t going to object.”* Explaining there was nothing wrong with these and other programmes and that they were being used in the school he went on to reflect on the possible formalisation of the programme. He suggested it would be less threatening if it were included as a transition unit with specific learning outcomes by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Then what he termed as *“more conservative schools”* would feel reassured that it was coming from *‘head office’* as a curriculum driven *‘written down’* programme.

Maeve could see a definite advantage in moving the programme to first year, *“the earlier the better”*. She continued that it should be started in first year and then carried on throughout the years for greater benefits. A number of other teachers were also in favour of introducing the programme on homophobic bullying to the younger students.

A number of students interviewed felt younger students would be too immature for this programme. Neil thought that by transition year students were settled into the school and Vincent added that fourth year is a good time to introduce the programme because the more flexible curriculum gave you greater time to consider new ideas: *“you’re learning about so much in TY that has nothing to do with school so it feels like you’re more likely to take it in”*.

Ronan thought that a few students in his class were uncomfortable. It was unclear from the discussion why these few felt uncomfortable. It may have been their level of maturity, or uncertainty surrounding their sexuality, or that they had a strong homophobic background, but this is only speculation. However, the overall feedback from students was strongly positive regarding the outcomes of the programme. All of the students talked about how they had

come to understand LGBT issues differently and expressed increased tolerance towards gay and lesbian people as a result of the workshops.

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According to staff and students the programme in this school is currently working well but in a limited way. To improve, they argue that the content of the programme needs to be reinforced across all aspects of school life. The thrust of the community-led programme described here is already focused on the problem of homophobic language. In partnership with the school, this has started along the path of enabling a positive outcome by breaking the cycle of the use of discriminatory language. The future lies in the development of the programme at a whole-school level and increasing the involvement of parents.

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### 3.5 Case Study School D Anti Bias Workshops in Girls' School

This school is a girls' single-sex Catholic voluntary school located in the same urban centre as school C. The school's anti-bullying policy does include a reference to homophobic bullying. The initiative in this school is the same programme as that provided in school C. Consent is obtained from parents/guardians to allow their daughter to participate in the SPHE/RSE programme.

The research in this school was conducted over three days and involved a group discussion with a number of teachers as well as individual interviews with Lisa the teacher who leads the programme and Elaine who is a local community worker involved in supporting the delivery of the programme. We also met with four students randomly chosen for a focus group and individual interviews. School policy documents and resources were also made available to us.

On why the school decided to participate in the programme again in this school teachers tended to talk about a pro-active and pluralist vision of education and the importance of broadening young peoples' minds. One teacher thought the programme was a positive move because the girls are preparing to *"spread their wings"*. She considered it a good programme to deliver to students because it creates an awareness of the *"rights of others and the right to be different"*. She added:

*"youngsters can get carried along and join in things even if they don't really want to be part of it and I would just hope that they would just take a step back and think that you know this person has rights and if they're gay or lesbian, they still have to enjoy the same rights as everybody else."*

Elaine believed in the programme, that it was providing a platform to bring issues into the public domain helping to remove the *"taboo"* in society attached to homosexuality. For the most part, teachers were of the belief that bullying in general and homophobic bullying in particular were not regular problems in this school.

However, students were found to have a different perception regarding the prevalence of homophobic bullying in the school. Rebecca, a student, said that there were certain groups who were bullied and that there were certain teachers who were *"blind"* to what was going on around them. She expressed a concern for some girls in second year who were bullied. She said that she had seen a couple of girls sitting in the corner by themselves and they could be seen as *"smart girls"* or they could be *"Goths, [girls who] dress in black clothes, dark makeup"*. She held the view that it was *"their choice"* to be themselves and nothing to do with anybody else, *"but some students pick on them because they are different?"* When asked to talk specifically about homophobic bullying Hazel was of the opinion that if anyone thought that another person was lesbian they would definitely be *"prejudiced against"* them. When asked what people say about lesbians, she replied:

*"That they're just weird and strange and that they don't really belong, you know what I mean, around the rest of us"*

The incongruence between the perceptions of teachers and students in relation to homophobic bullying was something that reoccurred in most of the schools we visited for this study and reflects the findings of previous research on homophobic bullying in Ireland (Norman, 2006).

The programme in this school was delivered in parallel with the neighbouring boys' school, as described above. Talking about the programme

the teacher, Lisa, commented on the quality of the speaker who delivered the workshop. She described how the session was based on an interactive discussion where the girls were able to question him about being gay in an *“honest and open space”*.

The speaker briefed the girls on his background and the history of growing up as a young gay person and how things have changed in Ireland during the last few years. He informed students of changes in the law and the organisations which have been developed to help support and inform people who identify as LGBT. As in the boys' school he investigated the stereotypical views people can hold and worked with the girls to explore their perception of what a lesbian or gay might look like. Elaine described how the speaker facilitated the lesson and allowed it to evolve in a free and fluid interactive session with all questions and issues answered and debated. She thought one of the highlights of the workshop was when the girls met the speaker. She said that no-one thought he was gay and described the girls' reaction:

***“ when that guy came in, none of the girls even presumed, they just didn't, they didn't believe that he was gay.”***

She felt this was effective learning in itself because it knocked on the head the idea that *‘you can spot the gay people in your school.*

In terms of the benefits of the workshops, teachers felt it was good for young people to have an opportunity to engage in an open and honest conversation about sexuality. For one teacher providing the workshops served the purpose of normalising the questions and insecurities often experienced by young girls where sexual orientation is concerned:

***“ it's hard enough in your teens, you know,***

***there's the whole adolescent . . . puberty . . . genes, the hormones, they're racing around and I think by doing more of these workshops . . . making it public, it isn't something to be ashamed of . . . something that you should stay quiet about, and I would hope in that sense that would take away any bullying around your gender orientation.”***

Students expressed how much they enjoyed the workshop because they learned to see things from a new perspective. Hazel said it was good the speaker was talking to them about lesbian and gay people. She learned that they were *“just like us”* and that:

***“they just like the same sex instead of the opposite and that we should treat them in the same as we would all of our friends.”***

Rebecca liked the speaker because he was humorous. She mentioned how surprised she was when she found out he was gay. She said *“when he walked in, we were a kinda looking at the door still for someone else to walk in”*. She said the workshop was *“brilliant”* because it allowed her to see things from a different perspective and to ask questions from someone who did not mind being asked about his sexuality. She was saddened by a story the speaker told about the guy who had to have his dad take him a long distance to the nearest big city to talk to someone about being gay because of a lack of support closer to home. Rebecca was empathising with the boy in the story and thought there should be gay or lesbian support groups within easy reach for everyone in the country.

Hazel was enthusiastic as well about the programme and said she learned:

*“how hard it is for someone who is gay to go to go to school if they’re being bullied and how difficult it is to talk to people about it. That there were people around that would help them, that . . . some people are too shy to go up and ask for help.”*

She also said that she learned that gay and lesbian people were “just every day people that you meet in streets, they look no different; they’re like everybody else.”

On challenges to the programme’s success some teachers expressed a concern regarding the gender of the external speaker, saying that although the girls were very “responsive” and the speaker was “brilliant”, a lesbian speaker would have been able to talk about things from a female perspective. Elaine, the community worker involved in the programme did note that posters depicting gay and lesbian themes, sent prior to the workshop, to reinforce the message, had not been displayed. She felt this was disappointing as the posters would have been a useful mechanism to reinforce the messages from the workshop.

When we were discussing the timing of the programme, Elaine mentioned how the transition year students surprised her with their level of knowledge and understanding. She felt that if they were so knowledgeable at that age, “why not let’s try starting it at an earlier age”. However, the teacher Lisa thought the present age of sixteen was a better age to introduce the programme.

The point of safety was raised during interview with students. Rebecca talked about the dangers of “coming out” in the school. In talking about this she also mentioned the lesbian and gay awareness posters that were forwarded to the school to be displayed during the workshop. She commented that they had not been put up for

students to see. When asked why she thought that might be, she replied:

*“In one way I think it’s to protect the students. The school know what kind of girls are going here and they know there’s fights so I think they might not have put them up to protect the girls, people from not coming out, but like still that’s not right, they should be allowed come out if they want to come out.”*

Another student supported this explaining that she felt the staff might be in a position to protect her or any other student in school, but not outside. She explained that on her journey to and from school she encounters girls who, she thinks, would bully anyone who came out; she believes they would:

*“do you know, they’d just taunt you and tease you all the days at school like, they’d start beating you and stuff going ‘it’s disgusting, it’s disgusting, you’re disgusting’ all this kind of stuff.”*

In her interview, Hazel commented that she did not think there was enough being done to address homophobic bullying. She would like to see more classes and more information on the topic. One student mentioned the Catholic ethos of the school as a possible hindrance to talking more about LGBT issues.

Rebecca expressed a view that was echoed by other students. She would like to have had a lesbian speaker (instead of a gay man) as her experiences would be more relevant to the girls:

*“...to just tell us their story about coming out and how people reacted towards them. And lesbians, because from our point of view we only have his story, so we didn’t know what other ways, how other people like coming out . . . I’d like to get a girl’s point of view.”*

Louise was also disappointed because of the sex of the speaker because *“we got a man to talk to us about it because he was gay, but, like, we’re in a girls’ school.”* She was adamant in the view that a lesbian speaker would have been better for a girls’ school. Louise felt that if there was a girl in the class who was lesbian it would have hampered her to have the workshop delivered by a man talking from a male perspective. She thought a female perspective was needed, saying *‘I’d say we would have been better off if it was a woman who came in’*. Another student raised the point that, in general, *“you don’t hear enough about lesbians and their experience”*. She went to point out that media coverage is predominantly about gay men, with little news concerning lesbians. Without a lesbian speaker this added to her feeling of frustration.

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Members of staff were satisfied with the programme and with the feedback from the students. However, both the teacher and the community worker involved in the delivery of the programme highlighted the need for the workshop and the use of the external speaker to be linked to a broader whole-school approach. The students were also generally satisfied with the programme, but raised practical issues. These issues included the possibility of having a female lesbian speaker whom they could relate to better than a male speaker who was gay. This gender of the speaker was also raised by the staff involved.

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### 3.6 Case Study School E Inclusive Religious Education

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This school is a Catholic co-educational comprehensive school in a small town. The boys and girls who attend this school come mainly from rural farming backgrounds. The school has a well thought out anti-bullying policy. The school policy displays an awareness of the variant guises of bullying including homophobic bullying. Anti-homophobic bullying posters were also displayed in the school. The initiative in this school has been developed, implemented and evaluated continuously over the last four years. It takes the form of a unit of work delivered as part of the Religious Education (RE) syllabus with senior cycle students.

The research in this school was conducted over two full days and involved individual interviews with the principal and with, Julia, who was the champion of the initiative in this school. We also interviewed four students and held a focus group with six others. All of the students had participated in the school’s initiative addressing homophobic bullying. In this school we were also able to observe a class in action.

The motivation for introducing the initiative on homophobic bullying in this school came from an increased awareness of the use of homophobic terms by students. In this case the school chaplain through her counselling role was particularly well placed to be able to obtain an insight into the effects of this type of bullying on students regardless of their sexuality. Julia explained that:

*“I was aware of homophobic bullying for many years among the boys but in more recent times among girls too. From my conversations with students I realised that a big part of the problem was a lack of information and a lot of stereotyping which*

*led to fear and a lack of understanding and acceptance.”*

Students in this school confirmed Julia’s impression of the widespread use of homophobic terms. They explained that anyone who is perceived as being different in some way runs a high risk of becoming the focus of discriminatory terms. During the interviews with students they displayed little knowledge about LGBT issues constructing ideas of a stereotypical nature which to them counted as a source of truth.

*“Gay men walk in a strange way, well not strange but different and they like shopping and stuff”*

On why some people are LGBT one female student explained that:

*“It’s the environment, someone who is cooking all the time. A mammy’s boy.”*

Some of the students described how younger teachers who wanted to develop a rapport with them outside of the classroom for example at football matches or on school tours, often embedded themselves within the language of the students and used word such as gay or queer but these students found this to be acceptable and did not see it as derogatory.

The programme in this school is championed by Julia. When she piloted the programme first she did meet with some opposition. She explained that:

*“Before starting the programme I presented my plan to the principal which included a copy of the resources I would use and a letter seeking consent from parents.”*

Julia found the principal to be initially supportive

but he did ask her to submit her plan to the school’s board of management for approval. Julia was happy to comply with this however the reaction from the board was not as positive as she had hoped. Some of the objections raised by the board focused on the fact that the programme seemed critical of the Catholic Church’s views on homosexuality. Undeterred, Julia refined and resubmitted her programme for approval by the school’s board. In her new application she outlined further that it was not her aim to unfairly criticize the Church’s teaching but rather she sought to mediate between the Catholic Church’s official position on homosexuality and the need for understanding and tolerance in society where people who are LGBT were concerned. She argued that this was sound practice supported by the official rationale for Religious Education at Senior Cycle which states that Religious Education:

*“has a particular role to play in the curriculum in the promotion of tolerance and mutual understanding. It seeks to develop in students the skills needed to engage in meaningful dialogue with those of other or of no religious traditions. Religious education, in offering opportunities to develop an informed and critical understanding of the Christian tradition in its historical origins and cultural and social expressions, should be part of a curriculum which seeks to promote the critical and cultural development of the individual in his or her social and personal contexts.”*

After a further meeting with the local Catholic priest at the request of the board, permission was given for Julia to run her module as long as parental consent was individually sought. A letter was sent to each student’s parent/guardian seeking consent to participate in the programme. Thus far over the last four years no objections have ever been raised by parents to their son/daughter taking part in the programme.

The module is offered to 5th year students and follows three phases which are spread over six classes of Religious Education. Given that no specific programme existed at the time, Julia brought together a number of resources to use as part of her module including aspects of the Exploring Masculinities programme, the Senior Cycle RSE programme and the Challenge of God RE textbook.

Phase one includes the gathering of pre-intervention levels of homophobia within the schools. A questionnaire is used for this phase which was adapted from a survey instrument developed in the USA (Maher, 2004) which consisted of 19 statements. The majority of the statements on the questionnaire were paraphrased from three official Church documents on the topic of homosexuality; *The Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics* (1975) from the Vatican, *A Personal Reflection on the Moral Life* (1976) from the US Bishops Conference and The Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons (1986) also from the Vatican. The statements fell into three categories a) Nature and Morality of Homosexuality, b) Rights of Gay and Lesbian People and c) Church Responsibility to Gay and Lesbian People. These categories did not appear on the survey instrument itself.

The first category "Nature and Morality" included three items that dealt with the dogmatic teaching that homosexual activity is morally wrong and gay and lesbian people are not responsible for their orientation. The second category "Rights of Gay and Lesbian People" included eight items which dealt with the dogmatic teachings that gay and lesbian people are equal members of the Church possessing basic human rights including respect, friendship, justice and freedom from verbal and physical abuse. The third category "Church

Responsibilities to Gay and Lesbian People" included five items that dealt with the dogmatic teachings that the Church should treat gay and lesbian people with understanding, welcome them into the Church, provide pastoral support, assist them in their integration into society and speak out against the verbal and physical abuse that some LGBT people suffer.

Respondents are asked to use a Likert scale with four options: "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree" and "strongly disagree". Respondents were also asked to indicate their sex and age to facilitate analysis on these variables. Upon analysis students' levels of homophobia were determined as either positive towards people who identify as LGBT or negative towards people who identify as LGBT and these were recorded for comparison with the results of the same survey when repeated at post-intervention stage.

Phase two of the module consists of a program of information designed by Julia as an intervention in the hope of reducing levels of homophobia and raising levels of acceptance. Julia begins the lesson by leading the students in a communal prayer. Together they pray for forgiveness for their sins and give thanks in whatever silent way they wish. Julia explains that the silence allows those students who wouldn't necessarily be dogmatically rooted in Catholicism a chance to express their spiritual thoughts in their own way. They also prayed aloud for some local needs including some young people who were in hospital following a severe car crash. The prayer was extended into a silent meditation led by Julia.

With their eyes open the class seemed more relaxed and ready for their first lesson in the module, which would explore;

- Sexual orientation
- Culture and Homosexuality

- The Church and homosexuality
- Homosexuality and the Law
- The right to be different

The focus of the first lesson centered on homosexuality and social reactions to it. Regardless of the resource materials used, it is without doubt the personality and passion of the teacher that is the most explicit pedagogical tool upon which the lesson is based. Julia was quite skilled at facilitating an open and honest discussion while at the same time rounding off the conversation with teaching input that provided learning about how homophobic bullying is not something that is approved by the Church.

Phase three marks the last stage in the module whereby the students' post-intervention responses were taken and compared with the pre-intervention ones. The results of the programme over the past four years have tended to show a marginal increase in knowledge and increased empathy. In general, Julia has found that males showed a more positive attitude after the module was taught than they did beforehand.

From Julia's perspective the module that she runs on homophobic bullying has been found to be successful. She finds it helps students to reconsider their stereotypical views and to be more conscious of the importance of tolerance and understanding where people who are LGBT are concerned. Analysis of students' pre and post intervention responses to the survey showed a general increase in positive attitudes after the module was taught. When comparison of male and female responses is made the results of the survey show that females displayed high levels of positive responses to the questionnaire before the module was taught, therefore it could not be expected that the module would increase these levels. The males on the other hand displayed

quite different results. For these, the levels of agreement with positive statements increased after the module, while agreement with negative statements decreased. The results suggest the effectiveness of the module decreasing homophobic attitudes among males. However, Julia emphasised the need to revisit and reinforce what is learned in the programme as the results can be short lived. She has also found that girls tend to be more tolerant of gay men while boys reject these and are more curious about lesbians.

From the students' perspective, they enjoyed the module and talked a lot about their relationship with Julia. It seemed that they felt comfortable with her and could talk openly with her because they did not associate her with members of staff who were more concerned with academic issues. Students pointed out that Julia was very comfortable talking about the topic of homosexuality and her comfort levels facilitated them in being more open. Males particularly expressed that they felt a comfort in discussing the topic in Julia's class that they said they did not feel in other settings. This suggests that it is important to provide a structured environment in which discussion and learning can take place. In interviews, students who had participated in the module provided clear expressions of change in relation to how they now respect people with different sexual orientations.

***"I realise it is important to respect people even if they are different... Whatever about what other people do, it is really their own business, as long as we are all treated the same, we are all human."***

One of the challenges to the continuance of this programme is the fact that it is closely associated with just one member of staff who, with the principals support, continues

to champion it within the school. However, both Julia and the principal admit that despite the success of this initiative in addressing homophobic bullying, it still needs to be connected to a whole-school framework which they are working to develop at different levels within the school.

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The initiative in this school has now been running for four years and the teacher who leads it has had the opportunity to evaluate the programme and re-develop aspects of as required. Despite some initial apprehension from the school's board of management, the school now supports and celebrates this programme while acknowledging the need to involve more staff and to integrate it further into a whole-school approach to bullying and equality issues.

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### 3.7 Case Study School F Peer Education

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This school is a large co-educational community school. This school has an anti-bullying policy but it does not specifically mention actions related to LGBT issues although it does indirectly refer to harassment and sexual harassment:

*“Using offensive names, teasing or spreading rumours about others or their families.”*

*“Making suggestive comments or other forms of sexual abuse.”*

The initiative in this takes the form of a peer education programme involving senior cycle students delivering relationships and sexuality education classes to junior cycle students. Consent is obtained from parents/guardians to allow their son/daughter to participate in the SPHE/RSE programme.

The research in this school took place over two full days in which we interviewed the SPHE teacher who leads the initiative, Stephanie, and four students who had participated in the programme. We also held a focus group with six students. All of the students were randomly chosen from the list those who had participated in the programme. School policy statements and other relevant materials were made available to us. We did have the opportunity to observe a class in action in this school.

The motivation behind the school's decision to introduce an initiative came from an increased awareness of the use by students of derogatory terms of a homophobic nature. Stephanie explains that:

*“Students use these words all day every day and most of the time they are not talking about sexuality but rather something they*

*don't like or that is different."*

She wondered if the over reliance by students on this language had to do with the fact that they had not learned a language sufficient to express how they felt about diversity no matter what form it comes in. Furthermore, as other Irish studies have found, there appeared to be years of conditioning emanating throughout the student discussions regarding what behaviours are considered normal for men and women, both in a sexual sense and in a social sense (Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Renehan, 2006). Students seemed to hold the belief that it was normal for men to be strong and women to be soft or maternal and that men should take initiative while women must not appear to take the lead on sexual matters otherwise they may be perceived and labeled negatively. All of the students interviewed stated that it would be hard to be different in the school, although they felt that it would be worse in the junior years. They each gave examples of the names that students are called and many of these were of a homophobic nature. One female student, interestingly stated that *"GAY is an insult, it doesn't mean you're a homosexual."*

The programme that is offered in this school is part of the SPHE programme which includes lessons on personal development, sexual relations, STI's and bullying, including homophobic bullying and the consequences of such behaviour. Since 1998 within the RSE component of the SPHE programme Stephanie has established a peer education element. The peer programme trains senior students from Transition, 5th and 6th year to present material from the RSE programme to younger students. Apart from what the senior students teach, the aim of the programme is to develop senior students as role models who themselves provide a template for young students to follow in terms of how to relate to each other. It is

also hoped that the fact that issues of a sexual nature being presented by someone close to their age will be taken more seriously by younger students than if it were presented by a teacher. When the student leaders take a junior class for a lesson they are provided with a script and resource materials which allow them to explore sexual orientation. They also present tasks of role description, self-attitude appraisal as well as exploring the nature/nurture debate surrounding sexuality. The materials used by the student leaders were taken from the Resource Materials for RSE, Senior Cycle Lesson 16. Stephanie explained that they had decided to allow the use of senior cycle materials with junior cycle students as it was agreed that the younger students were more advanced in their knowledge than the junior syllabus gave them credit for.

The lessons that were led by the student leaders presented an opportunity to discuss feelings about people who identify as LGBT. In particular, it allowed some of the males to vent their concerns openly within the classroom without feeling awkward whilst others remained quiet. A number of aspects that made student led lesson interesting included the fact that some stereotypical views regarding the roles of men and women were discussed and openly challenged within the lesson. There was also an animated discussion about the role of LGBT parents and the influence it may have on the future sexuality of their children. Students were asked to consider what is meant by "normal" and "abnormal" sexuality and also what would it mean if a close friend were to reveal that s/he was gay or lesbian?

In this instance a boy stated that he wouldn't be comfortable around his friend if his friend disclosed that he was gay. This was accepted by the class but questioned by the teacher in order to probe the rationality behind his feelings.

Upon investigation it became apparent that his ill comfort and obvious prejudices arose from two things;

First he was afraid that his friend would make a sexual advance towards him and secondly he felt that his relationship with his friend would change as he would no longer be able to talk about football or girls he liked and about sexual relations.

These fears, which might lead to prejudice did not fit the religious or moral stance of wrongness or deviation from normal relationships but rather they were an honest expression of loss, that somehow his friend would no longer be the same person.

These points were challenged in 2 ways; firstly by using the comparison of girls being attracted to the boy in question;

- Teacher: You think that every gay boy or man would be attracted to you?
- Student: Well yeah, I guess so.
- Teacher: Do you think that every woman is attracted to you?!
- Student: Eh Maybe! No not really.
- Teacher: Well why?
- Student: Cause different tastes, not all girls' fancy same types of fella.
- Teacher: And do you fancy all girls?
- Student: No
- Teacher: So what's the difference then, can't a gay lad be picky?

In response to his other fear, a poem had been read out describing a young gay man and his fears. In the poem the young man describes that he is just like any other male of his age except he is attracted to other males. The poem's message was accepted by the class but was later criticized because it had been written by a woman, not a man and therefore did not

reflect the feelings of a gay young man at all but the idea of a gay young man from a woman's perspective.

While the overall initiative was creative some challenges exist to its continued success. There seemed to be reluctance on the part of the students receiving the lesson to take on board the sentiments of some of the materials which were presented as gay experiences and thoughts in young men but were in fact written by women. The authenticity of material used seemed to be of importance to the students and teachers alike. When asked what would improve the experience students wanted to see a video or meet a real person who was LGBT.

***"It would be better if we got someone's story of coming out, show how hard it would be, being alone and coping with that for real."***

***"we need to have some talks, like people coming in and talking about their story."***

Students who had acted as student leaders in the programme themselves felt that they did not have enough information to deal with some of the questions that younger students ask. They also said that they were not comfortable dealing with the LGBT issues as they were concerned that they might be perceived to be LGBT themselves.

When asked if they learned anything new from participating in the programme, students responses were mixed. Some indicated that there was a good understanding of LGBT issues after the programme as it had expanded on their previous knowledge:

***"It made me aware of the prejudice against gays in some parts of society, like some pubs won't serve gay people."***

On the other hand, some students believed that their personal experiences had already given them the knowledge they needed:

*“Not much really to learn like, my cousin is bisexual so I am ok with all of that stuff.”*

Overall male students reported that they found the programme of use more than females. In terms of how they would treat a gay or lesbian person after completing the programme, all of the students reported that they would treat them favourably and that equality was what they valued. Both teachers and student leaders alike talked about the need for more time for training, greater authenticity and availability of speakers, materials and other resources.

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A peer programme was introduced in this school as an initiative to address bullying and homophobic bullying in particular. The teacher who leads the programme has identified the success of the programme as being limited due to a lack of support from other teachers and relevant resource materials. However, many of the students who participated as peer educators or as learners reported that they increased their knowledge about LGBT issues as a result of the programme.

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# A Whole School Approach

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#### 4.1 Introduction

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It is clear from the review of research and policy literature as well as the six case studies in the previous chapters that in order for an initiative aimed at addressing homophobic bullying to be successful, it must be developed as part of a mainstream or whole-school approach to the problem.

Several elements have to be considered in any action taken if the school is to truly develop a whole-school approach to the problem of homophobic bullying.

This concluding chapter outlines seven essential elements that can be used as a check list by school leaders who are trying to develop a whole-school approach to addressing homophobic bullying.

In this regard two recent resource publications provide detailed practical guidance for principals and other school leaders. These are:

Department of Education and Science and Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (2009) *Lesbian Gay and Bisexual Students in Post-Primary Schools: Guidance for Principals and School Leaders*

Equality Authority and School Development Planning Initiative (2010) *Guidelines for Second Level Schools on Embedding Equality in School Development Planning*

#### 4.2 Leadership and Managing Change

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The roles of the Board of Management and Principal are of great importance in animating a whole-school approach to homophobic bullying. Leadership should also be understood to encompass the contribution of deputy-principals, class tutors, year heads, chaplains, guidance counsellors, subject leaders, parents councils, and also prefects and other senior students. Fundamentally, it is the responsibility of all those who are identified as leaders within the school community to ensure that practical steps are taken to challenge and respond to homophobic bullying. This can be done by principals and other leaders in the school striving to engender an ethos in the school in which homophobia is as unacceptable as racism or sexism. It is also vital that school leaders involve both staff and students in developing and implementing a vision of the school where diversity is recognised and celebrated.

The principal has a key role in modelling the type of behaviour that s/he wants staff and students to demonstrate. This includes an approach to leadership that involves understanding, respect and inclusiveness. Nothing will undermine a whole school approach to bullying more than if the students and staff perceive those in authority to be failing in their responsibilities to develop an environment in which people feel cared for and respected. This means that senior management must value the entire school community and be sensitive to the needs of individuals, including their need for professional development.

A whole school approach will involve the provision of specific training for members of schools' boards of management, parents and staff on the issue of homophobic bullying, on diversity in sexual orientation and on the Equal Status Legislation. The results of this training will have to be monitored for its effectiveness in

bringing about and sustaining change within the school.

Finally, it might be an idea for school leadership to begin with an audit, similar to the one developed by the Bolton Homophobic Forum (2003) mentioned in chapter two. This should include students and staff keeping a log of homophobic bullying (verbal and physical) as it occurs over a specific period of time. Such an audit would give a clear idea of the extent of the problem within the school and the task of bringing about change within a whole-school framework.

### 4.3 Policy Development

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All second-level schools are now required to have a number of policies in place including one on bullying. In August 2006 in order to reduce the administrative burden on schools the Department of Education & Science issued a template anti-bullying policy. This template from the DES built on the previously issued *Guidelines in Countering Bullying in Schools* (1993) and included reference to homophobic bullying. This was a major step forward in breaking the silence and invisibility that often surrounds homophobic bullying in Irish second-level schools, even at a policy level (Norman, 2006).

It is vital to have up-to-date policies and to have associated procedures for dealing with homophobia and homophobic bullying. This can be done as part of a wider Code of Behaviour. One study found that while almost all schools had anti-bullying policies, only 10% included any reference to lesbian and gay bullying (Norman, 2006:63). This policy should be developed and reviewed in consultation with all members of the school community, and should emphasise that homophobic bullying and similar behaviour will not be accepted in the school. The policy should include procedures for dealing with incidents of

homophobic bullying when they occur. The policy should also state the school's commitment to taking preventative action to reduce the likelihood of homophobic incidents occurring and outline the steps to be taken in this regard.

In developing this policy the school will need to state that any perpetrators of homophobic incidents will be dealt with severely and that those who are bullied will receive appropriate support. The school's policy on bullying should also refer to the schools commitment to recognising and celebrating the diversity of backgrounds and identities of all in the school community. Finally, the anti-bullying policy will need to include an element of monitoring and evaluating incidents of homophobic bullying and the mechanisms for these will need to be stated and operated clearly and efficiently.

### 4.4 Curriculum Planning for Teaching and Learning

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The review of research and policy literature and the case studies previously outlined in this report reveal that there are many opportunities across the curriculum to challenge pupils to think about their attitudes, to correct misinformation, and to raise awareness about the implications of prejudice and discrimination. The use of one off workshops or visiting speakers is valuable in tackling homophobic bullying in a school, but it is not sufficient. It is also necessary to discuss issues such as homophobia within a broader context. Such discussions will help students to understand that difference is part of life, something to be valued and celebrated and that homophobic bullying is a fundamental rejection of human diversity.

While some classes such as CSPE, RE, and SPHE/RSE will provide an obvious platform for teaching and learning about LGBT issues

and homophobia, there is a place within most subjects on the curriculum to promote and value diversity and to teach about homophobic bullying as something that is wrong. From time to time, and when appropriate, teachers should ensure that they include reference to homophobia in their lessons and senior management should ensure that schemes of work reflect this. Research has shown that young people can rely on knowledge and understanding about LGBT people that is deeply stereotyped (Norman, 2006:104). Consequently, it is important that teachers in all subjects across the curriculum provide positive and non-stereotypical role models of people who identify as LGBT and of people who do not identify as LGBT but who value and respect diversity.

Finally, it is important to remember that teaching about sexuality involves teaching about different kinds of relationship, about friendship, about love and about caring for ourselves and others. It is not the same as teaching about sex. However, in order for staff to demonstrate that they personally feel secure to challenge homophobia and to answer students' questions about sexuality, they will need to be provided with professional development opportunities to facilitate them in developing this competence.

#### 4.5 School Ethos

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At the centre of a whole-school approach to addressing homophobic bullying is the creation of a positive school ethos that recognises and celebrates diversity and promotes equality. The ethos of a school is an elusive entity, the result of many influencing factors at work in the school community. Fundamentally though, school ethos can be described as the atmosphere that emerges from the interaction of a number of aspects of school life, including teaching and learning, management and leadership, the use

of images and symbols, rituals and practices, as well as goals and expectations. School ethos is the dominant pervading atmosphere or character of the school resulting from the habits of behaviour of those who are part of it (Norman, 2003:2; Williams, 2000:74). A positive school ethos is characterised by a respect for the individual regardless of his/her background or identity (DES, 1993:9). School ethos can be said to influence every aspect of school life and is a determinant factor in the success of work to address homophobic bullying.

Contrasting views on homosexuality between the main religious faiths (see Ratzinger, 1986; The Lambeth Conference, 1998; Ahmed Al-Mesalati et al. 2004) can often be seen as an obstacle to addressing homophobia in schools. However, regardless of a school's denominational status, most religions and faiths are based on justice and fairness. Therefore, the key issue to address is not so much the range of religious beliefs about sexuality, but rather the need to challenge discrimination and promote the respect and equality of all people.

It is important then, that all documentation including the staff handbook and student journals make it clear that the school does not tolerate discrimination or harassment of any kind including homophobia. This can also be made explicit in staff recruitment information and in student admissions policies as well as through the use of relevant posters.

The school ethos cannot be rooted in the presumption that everyone is heterosexual. School leaders will have to challenge such presumptions by making explicit reference to LGBT issues and providing relevant resources and other materials for use in classrooms and around the school. This should remind everyone, including staff, that although often invisible, people who identify as LGBT are valued

members of the school community. What is most important is that no member of staff, parent or student is left with any ambiguity in terms of where the school, including trustees, stands on the issue of homophobic bullying.

#### 4.6 Student Voice

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The most effective way to obtain the support and co-operation of students in addressing homophobic bullying is to involve them in developing ways of challenging such discriminatory behaviour. Due to numbers, it is unlikely that it will be possible to engage all of the students with every aspect of a school's response to homophobic bullying. However, it will be possible to engage groups of students with different levels of the school's response in different ways and thus over time all students should feel that they have contributed to and therefore own their school's policies, procedures and activities to address homophobic bullying.

Student councils where they exist can provide a platform for discussion about how to involve students in tackling bullying and discriminatory behaviour.

The Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme provides the main context for dealing with issues around bullying generally (DES, 1993:9). As part of the SPHE programme students could design a survey to assess the extent of homophobic bullying in the school and then design and implement appropriate responses to address the problem. Pupils can also use suggestion boxes to express their opinions on homophobic bullying and how to address it within the school.

#### 4.7 Provision of Student Support Services

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While many of the elements of a whole-school approach are focused on addressing homophobia across the school, there is also a need to provide support directly to individual students (and sometimes staff) who experience homophobic bullying.

Research in Ireland and the UK confirms the importance of relationships of trust and mediation for young people who find they experience difficulties in second-level schools (Coldron, 2002; Murphy, 2004). Generally, year heads, class tutors and other members of staff play an important role in helping young people to overcome the effects of homophobic bullying. This can be achieved by respecting requests for confidentiality from students and ensuring that a supportive atmosphere is maintained in tutor groups and subject classes.

The role of peer mentors has also been shown to be quite successful and within the limits of their competency they can sometimes act as a first port of call for those students who need to seek advice or support. This is definitely an area that could be developed further in schools. Senior Management Teams will need to identify funding to allow for the training of teachers and students who will provide this type of activity at a school level.

Furthermore, key support staff such as the school's chaplain, guidance counsellor, home-school community liaison and school nurse have a particular role in terms of animating the pastoral ethos of a school by offering specialised support to students who are experiencing difficulties. These key staff will also need to be aware of the emotional health issues that surround homophobic bullying. In order to provide this support they will need adequate space and time to ensure that they are available

when the students need them. A simple thing like placing a LGBT rainbow sticker in a prominent place such as on an office door can send out the message that support is available. It is important that other members of staff are aware of the contribution that these key staff can make and that clear referral procedures are in place.

However, all members of staff take responsibility for the well-being of their students and should not abdicate all responsibility to key staff such as the chaplain or guidance counsellor.

#### **4.8 Partnership with Parents and Local Communities**

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Parents, guardians and local communities play an important role in a whole-school approach to tackling homophobic bullying. As well as being sensitive to the fact that parents and guardians may be LGBT, schools need to seek ways of consulting and involving parents, guardians and members of the local community when responding to homophobia and homophobic bullying, while being clear about the school's approach to the issue.

Such a partnership will need to be planned and carried out in a very sensitive manner. Societal changes have been dramatic in contemporary Ireland and increasingly the school is expected to mediate between the contrasting cultures of home life, community, media, churches, and other stakeholders (Martin, 2006:3.1).

Schools should not presume that all students are from a "traditional" family background and encourage all parents and guardians to attend meetings and visit the school regularly. The school will need to frequently remind parents and guardians that any information they have about their personal lives, sexuality, child

minding arrangements and so on will be treated confidentially.

It is important that the school has in place a clear and confidential procedure for parents and guardians to raise their concerns including those about homophobic bullying. These procedures should be well publicised and referred to in student handbooks, school policies, school brochures and websites.

In recent years a number of well run LGBT youth groups have been established around the country and these are a particularly appropriate community support for young people who identify as LGBT and/or who experience homophobic bullying. Staff, parents and young people may be unaware of this type of support so a school's working group may have to identify these local groups and provide information about them to the school community. This can be done in newsletters, on notice boards, websites and in handbooks.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

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Implementing a whole-school approach to addressing the problem of homophobic bullying will not be achieved over night. It will involve all of the elements outlined above and will evolve over time. However, as our review of research and policy literature and the case studies have shown it is possible to make a start and to build on success no matter how small it may be initially.

It is vital that school leaders provide opportunities to validate and celebrate successes while keeping the school focused on what future challenges need to be met. Cultural change is slow and staff, parents and students will need constant support and training to assist them in achieving their goals where homophobic

bullying is concerned. Students will need to be continually rewarded for contributing to a school community where diversity is appreciated and respected.

Finally, it is important to recognise the need to provide support and encouragement to members of the school community who decide to reveal that they identify as LGBT. All young people have the right to be open about their sexuality but they also need to consider the reactions of other people and the stress that can sometimes be associated with “coming out”. During this time, students will need to know that whatever they say about their sexuality to key staff or teachers will be treated with respect and in confidence. These young people will have to make decisions all through their lives about when to be open about their sexuality and their first experiences can be highly significant in determining how they handle such decisions in the future.



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